

11 Months by thewolfmoon

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Summary:

Eleven's gone for 353 days. Mike struggles through each and every one of them.

11 Months

Author's Note:

This one goes out to my cousin and twin who love emo Mike as much as I do :) Check them out at @eddiesbadbreak and @beepsrichie on tumblr

Come visit me @eddiesghost

December will be the hardest

This is what Mike tells himself. This is what others tell him.

It'll be hard of course, first month after El, first month without El. Change is always painful at the start. Like the resetting of a broken bone, it has to hurt before it gets better.

It has to hurt, it's going to hurt.

He tells himself this and lets it slip in and out of his mind like a mantra, a prayer. His mother hangs Christmas decorations and offers him sweet smiles everyday. Nancy reminds him (3 different times) that he can talk to her, that she understands, she lost someone too. And his father, his father is as impassive and out of reach as he's always been. They sit at the dinner table as a family and he asks Mike what he wants for Christmas around a mouthful of steak.

Mike doesn't respond and no one pushes it. He plays with his food and repeats the answer again and again in his head.

Having Will back both comforts and unsettles him. He loves his friend, more than he thinks he'd ever be able to outwardly say, but things aren't exactly the same. Mike can feel the print of the Upside Down radiating off of him. He watches Will when no one else does and catches the things that seem to slip right by Dustin and Lucas. Like the way his smile drops the slightest bit when he thinks he's alone, or the way he jumps and startles whenever someone moves too close or too fast.

Mike catches the tremors that seize his hands, the crippling fear that leaves his eyes wet with tears and just *knows* . He knows something is broken, something has been taken away. He knows the same thing that took Eleven has snuffed out some of the old Will. He knows that, in a way, he's lost two people. Will's back but it's not the same, he's not the same. There are scars crisscrossing his life like hatch marks, and they all spell out the same thing.

When the last few days of December come and go Mike's almost surprised to find that he's not cried, not since that night in school when it all ended. He sits on the edge of his bed during Christmas break and thinks about this. He convinces himself that it means he's strong, that it means he'll survive. The worst is over, right? It's only supposed to get better from here, an upward climb.

Time heals wounds. That's what they say in books and on T.V., time heals. And besides, it's not like El is dead. He knows this as well as he knows the rhythm of his own heart. He's not in mourning like Dustin and Lucas thinks he is, he doesn't have to adjust to the thought that she's gone for good, that she's left to someplace he won't be able to reach. He's not like the people that have to cry over someone's grave, the people that end up floating through life empty, pale and mute like the ghosts they chase after.

El's alive and she's going to come back, sometime someday she's going to come back.

He holds onto this bit of knowledge and keeps it close to his chest. It's enough, it has to be enough.

January is a blur.

Mike hardly feels it. The weeks brush by him like the flakes of snow that have begun to fall from the sky.

His days are consumed by the monotony of school and routine. He

doesn't really sleep, not anymore. It's become too difficult. He spends his nights tracing the slight cracks on his ceiling with his eyes and counting down from 200. Sometimes he'll slip down to the basement and curl up under the fort where Eleven slept. He wraps himself up in her blankets and thinks about how she once did the same. It makes her feel close. He likes being able to touch the same things she did.

He bikes to and from school, loses himself in his homework, his projects, his tests. He laughs at Dustin's jokes and tries to top Lucas' score at the arcade. He tells Will everything about El, watches his eyes widen in amazement and wistfulness each time. They're growing closer once again, but it's still not the same. Then again, he's stopped expecting things to go back to normal a long time ago.

His favorite and least favorite part of the day is the 15 minutes he devotes to calling out to El. Every night (*every night*) he seats himself in her fort and speaks into the same walkie-talkie she used to contact Will. He knows that he doesn't have the same abilities she does, but still, if it was possible to reach Will in the Upside Down maybe it's possible for Mike to reach her, wherever she is. Maybe is all he needs. Maybe is enough. He holds the radio close to his face and speaks her name over and over again. He tells her that he's here, that he's not given up. He begs for a response, anything, the tiniest sign just so he'd know he's not alone. And then he waits.

He's learned the sounds that echo through the basement by heart because they're the only things he gets in response. The creak of floorboards above his head as someone makes their way around upstairs, the distant rushing noise of water moving through pipes, the soft drizzle of the T.V., always on the same channel at the same time. He hears everything but El.

That's the worst part, the disappointment. He always reminds himself not to get too excited, too hopeful, but it happens anyway. His heart sinks somewhere deep in his chest every time, and for a moment the entire world becomes a little too heavy to bear. He thinks he won't be able to get up, or move or talk or do anything ever again.

But he always does. He doesn't know how, but he does.

And what does it matter if his knees are a little unsteady, or if it becomes just the tiniest bit harder to breathe? It means nothing, because he's okay.

He's okay and there's always tomorrow. Always.

February and March come like a kick to the teeth.

That's the best way Mike can describe it, he doesn't know why.

Maybe it's because Troy and his toadies have started up again. They'd been quiet for a while, had stayed away in face of Will's miraculous return and all the attention that had come with it. But now they were back, and with a blood-fueled fervor.

Mike can handle them coming for him. He doesn't mind it, it doesn't matter. He lets their comments slide off his shoulders like rain, ignores it when they trip him in the halls, when they slash his bike tires and shove him into walls.

What he can't handle is them going after Will. Will who still flinched at loud noises. Will who was still battling away a series of horrific memories, ones that left him terrified and isolated enough as it was.

But they do go after Will. They spare him from nothing.

Mike is forced to watch as Will opens his locker to find a new crude note everyday. They call him "zombie boy", "freak". They draw pictures of him dead, his skin colored green and blue, his eyes x'ed out.

Will crumples these notes and buries them in his backpack. Mike asks why he doesn't just throw them away. Will doesn't tell him, he never tells him.

Things go on like this for a while. Dustin jokes that things are

“business as usual” once more. After all, they’d always been bullied, they’d always been outcasts, losers. *Guess nothing ever changes*, he says.

But he’s wrong. Things are different, this is different. Troy and his friends are mad, furious even. Mike thinks it’s because of Eleven, because of the way she humiliated them, put them in their place. The thought makes him smile. He keeps it at the back of his mind and visits it whenever they’re knocking his books over, or pinning him against lockers. It’s easy to slip away from it all, to let them do whatever they want without giving them the satisfaction of seeing him upset or afraid.

He’s not either of those things. It just doesn’t bother him anymore. He doesn’t feel it, he doesn’t feel anything.

It’s this exact numbness that has him almost wishing that they’d take it farther, that they’d hit him in a way that actually hurts, a way that would break him out of the fog-heavy haze he’d somehow fallen into. He doesn’t tell anyone this. He’s sure they’d think he’s crazy. There’s no way anyone would understand.

In March he gets the closest thing to his wish.

Troy has Will cornered in the boy’s bathroom one day after school. It’s pure luck that Mike walks in when he does. He doesn’t normally stop by the restroom before heading home, but today he just couldn’t hold it.

He walks in and the first thing he sees is Troy’s hand on Will’s shoulder. It’s a white-knuckled grip, one that has Will trembling beneath it. He’s whispering something into Will’s ear as well. Mike doesn’t hear it, but he doesn’t need to.

Anger, white hot and flaming, rips through him like a current.

He tears Troy away from Will and shoves him against the line of sinks.

“Don’t touch him,” he spits, “don’t you ever fucking touch him.”

Troy's fist connects with his nose and before he knows it he's on the floor, warmth spreading from his nostrils and coating his lips with the bitter taste of copper. He lies there and lets Troy land kick after kick on his chest, his stomach, his ribs.

He could've taken him if he wanted to. He'd grown a lot in the past few months, he and Troy were practically the same height now. He could've fought back. He could've.

But he doesn't.

He lets Troy stomp out his anger, lets him kick and kick until his vision is swimming and there's blood in his throat. He clings to the pain, to the bone-deep ache that's settling somewhere in the pit of him.

"Sucks not having your freak of a girlfriend to protect you, huh?"

This has been a long time coming.

When Troy's finally done Mike sits up and finds Will huddled against the far wall, tears in his eyes and hands over his ears.

Guilt washes over him. It's worse than the pain.

"I'm okay," he says, but it comes out all wrong. His tongue is thick and heavy in his mouth and his voice is no stronger than a whisper. Will shakes his head and the way he looks at Mike makes him feel like he's seeing right through him.

Will helps him up and they don't speak after that. There's nothing to say.

He comes home with blood still streaming from his nose and staining the collar of his shirt. No one notices. He's glad of it.

Mike sleeps and sleeps and sleeps through the last few months of school.

He finds the sudden change ironic, it wasn't that long ago that he spent night after night wide awake in bed. Now he can barely get up.

He's just tired, so very very tired.

He goes to bed exhausted and wakes up exhausted. He falls asleep during class and at lunch, nods off three separate times over his plate at dinner.

His mother thinks he's sick. She feels his forehead for a temperature and insists he sees a doctor.

"I'm worried," she says, "it could be a cold or the flu or God knows what."

Mike tells her that he's okay, assures her that he's not sick. It's not entirely a lie, after all he *isn't* sick, at least not in the way she thinks he is.

Sleep becomes his new escape. He doesn't have to think about anything while asleep, doesn't have to worry or stress or feel things, period.

He sleeps through the weekends, through Dustin and Lucas calling out to him on his talkie, begging him to meet up so they can play. He sleeps through his parents fighting, through slammed doors and curse words flung from one room to the next. He sleeps through the nothingness, through the empty spaces that have begun to swallow up his days.

He dreams a lot and sometimes the dreams are good. He'll dream about El, about her arms around his waist as they drive around on his bike. He'll dream about their kiss, about her lips soft and light against his own while the world fell into chaos around them.

Most of his dreams are bad though.

He dreams about El shouting for him in the Upside Down. About her lost and alone, chased by the demogorgon she killed, running through a world empty of light. He can see her but he can never help.

He's stuck on the other side, separated by a wall that he can touch but not break.

His other dreams are about the cliff. In these he's alone. There's no Troy or James, no Dustin and definitely no El. Just him and the edge.

He jumps, he always does. He jumps and knows no one is there to catch him.

He wakes up in the mornings with wet cheeks and a voice that's been rubbed raw. He doesn't think much about this, ignores it until Nancy comes into his room after Dinner one day, her expression soft and unreadable.

"Are you— are you okay?" Her brows are drawn low, she's concerned. Mike doesn't understand it.

"Why?" He asks.

Nancy sits down next to him on the edge of his bed, close enough that her shoulder brushes his.

"You scream in your sleep." She says this without looking at him, her fingers worrying at the hem of her pale pink skirt. "I hear you. It's—it's almost every night Mike."

Mike remains silent.

Nancy sighs. "I always want to wake you up but then, I don't know, I'm just not sure if you want me to. I don't want to upset you even more."

Mike bristles, pushing himself away from her so that he's back up against his headboard. "Upset me? I'm not upset. They're dreams, okay? Just stupid dreams."

He crosses his arms and refuses to look at her. He's mad and doesn't even know why. He wishes she'd just leave.

"You can talk to me, okay? I get it, you know, Barb's—"

“No,” Mike says, “you don’t. El’s not dead. She’s not like Barb.” He takes a breath, “And besides, it’s not just that, it’s—” *Everything, all of it. I can’t stand any of it anymore.*

The words get lodged in his throat. He knows he’ll never be able to speak them. Not ever. Nancy stares at him and he feels his nose sting, the way it always does when he’s about to cry.

“Just go,” he says, “please just leave.” She does and he presses the heels of his palms into his eyes until he knows that he’s okay.

That night, in the basement, he tells Eleven about his dreams. He doesn’t expect a response and he doesn’t get one.

He tells her that he hopes she’s sleeping well, wherever she is.

Summer comes and goes. It’s distracting enough.

Mike bikes around town with his friends. They go to the arcade, the movies, the video store. They play dungeons and dragons for hours on end and swim at the lake until their muscles are sore.

The sun colors Mike’s cheeks, his arms, his hands. His hair grows longer, past his ears. He gets taller.

His mother is happy. He looks healthy. She puts her hands on his shoulders and says that he’s “shooting up like a weed”.

He learns how to hide his exhaustion, how to pretend like nothing’s ever bothering him.

This is what his parents like, it’s what they want.

His nightmares have stuttered to a halt. He doesn’t dream about El or

the cliff anymore. He doesn't dream about anything. It's better this way. He doesn't want Nancy coming into his room again, he doesn't want the attention, the worry. He can deal with these things on his own.

It's been nine months.

Everything is worse in September.

Mike doesn't know what happened. He thought things had been getting better, he thought he had control. Turns out he doesn't.

He's angry almost all the time now. It's a niggling itch at the back of his mind, a ceaseless throb that makes him want to scream, makes him want to hit.

He doesn't even know what or who he's mad at. It's everything and everyone. He watches his father space out, day after day, in front of the T.V. and wants to upturn his chair. Wants to shake him by the shoulders so that his head snaps forward and back. Maybe then he'd wake, maybe then he'd realize.

He fantasizes about breaking things. Plates, glasses, windows.

He gets into fights.

One of Troy's friends makes a snide comment about his shirt and Mike punches him hard enough that his knuckles split.

He bickers with Nancy, curses out his next-door neighbor, and flips the principal off behind his back. He just doesn't care. Nothing matters anymore and he refuses to pretend for everyone else's sake.

He stops going to class, stops doing homework. He uses a textbook to plagiarize his history essay and acts like he's shocked when his mother grounds him for it. In one of the freshly painted bathroom

stalls at school he slanders his teacher with one of those jumbo-sized sharpie markers.

Mr. Lewis is a cocksucker , he writes, in big blocky letters.

Cocksucker, it's one of Troy's favorite words.

He only gets caught for half the things he does but his mother still makes a huge deal over what little she knows.

"What's gotten into you?" She asks, Holly in one arm and a bag of groceries in the other, "This is the third time the school's called, Michael. The third time."

Mike rolls his eyes and brushes past her to his room. She's become nothing more than a broken record to him now. Her questions are empty, predictable, paper-thin. They aren't meant to be answered, so why should he even try?

He still talks to El, every night, though the time he spends downstairs becomes shorter and shorter. He keeps the one-sided conversations terse and to the point, letting her know that he's here, that he hasn't given up. There isn't much left to say beyond that.

When the leaves begin to fall Will's health starts to falter.

He isn't sick, not in the normal way at least. He doesn't cough, or have a runny nose. He isn't tired or weak. He's just...distant.

Mike knows he's been having more and more of what Joyce refers to as his "episodes". Those small moments of time in which he freezes in place, his muscles seizing and his eyes going blank. Will tells him it's because he's seeing the Upside Down, he tells him that it feels real, that it feels like he's actually there.

Mike worries. He watches Will leave school early for his doctor visits and prays that he's okay, that this is normal, that everything will work itself out. He can't lose him, not now, not ever. He knows he wouldn't be able to survive it.

The Halloween decorations go up in and around town. Stores hang faux spider webs from the corner of their windows and people place their carved pumpkins along the front steps of their house. Mike pretends like he's excited to go trick-or-treating just to please his friends. Besides, if Will's excited for it Mike has no problem with playing along or doing whatever. He wouldn't ruin this, he wouldn't even dream of it.

He still struggles with his anger. It's getting worse, he thinks.

He's barely able to hide his frustration or annoyance around Max in particular. Max, the mysterious girl with the flaming red hair and weathered down skateboard. Max. Mad Max. The one that's been slyly sneaking her way into their group, unbeknowningly attempting to take up the space Eleven once filled.

Mike hates her for it.

He knows it's unfair, that she's just lonely, it's not like she means to intrude. After all, she doesn't even know who El is. Still, he can't get past the thought of his friends moving on, propelled by the presence of someone else, someone new. He doesn't want them to forget because he knows he never will. He doesn't want to be alone.

So he pushes her away, tells her to leave, tells her that they don't need a "zoomer" or whatever the hell else she thinks she can be. He wants her gone. She's pushing buttons he didn't even think he had and he's afraid that soon enough he'll snap.

It doesn't help that he's begun to hear and feel things that aren't there. He's become haunted by subtle shifts in the air, by small pulls that tug at the center of him.

It's El and it's not El. It's a soft voice mingled with the static in his radio, it's the light brush of a hand against his own. He swears that she's there but she never is.

It's cruel, the way his mind plays tricks on him. That's what he has to boil it down to, tricks. He can't (he *won't*) believe that they're anything more. He doesn't want to chase after what he can't see because he knows that if he starts he'll never stop.

So he remains on edge.

He keeps Max at arm's length and sticks close to Will's side. He devotes all his attention to the problems at hand and forgets to show up to school (or eat or sleep or do anything else he can no longer bring himself to care about).

This is how it has to be. This is how he manages.

*

Things get bad fast.

Will wilts and changes beneath the presence of the shadow monster. Mike watches him fade into less and less of himself and hates himself for not being able to stop it.

The air grows crisp and cool with each passing day and the window to Will's bedroom is left open while he sleeps.

He likes it cold , he says.

Mike knows this because he's never home anymore. He spends his nights lying on the floor by Will's bed pretending that he's asleep although he never is. Instead he whittles away the hours by watching, listening. He counts Will's shallow breaths like he's counting sheep and studies the dozens of drawings that are scattered about the room like confetti.

The night before Will's wheeled into the E.R. Mike sees something. He's playing with the strings of his hoodie while Will sleeps, knotting and unknotting them when a slight movement in the far corner of the room catches his eye. It's dark, almost too dark to see, but he knows the outline of a person when he sees one.

There's someone else in the room with them.

He's scared at first, of course. His heart jackrabbits into his throat and a sheen of sweat slides right over his skin. It could be anything, anyone. It could be the shadow monster itself, come to take what little's left of Will.

But the longer he stares the calmer he grows. He sits up on shaky arms and squints into dark, something other than fear rising up inside him. It looks like— It almost seems like—

Eleven.

She steps out of the shadows and seats herself in a patch of moonlight that's stretched across the floor. "Mike," she whispers, like she's been here this entire time, "Mike."

Mike doesn't move, his blood has run cold. He stares at her, mouth hanging slightly agape, and tries to speak, tries to form the sounds that make her name. Nothing comes out.

She cocks her head at him. Her eyes are wide and wet, her face is streaked with dirt. She looks like she did the night she left him.

"Mike," she says it again, but this time it's spoken like a tremulous plea, a dying prayer. It breaks him right out of his reverie.

"El," he says, his breath stuttering in his chest, "I thought you were gone. I thought—"

El shakes her head. There's a broken smile surfacing on her face. "Please, just," she holds her arms out in front of her, welcoming him, and it's all the invitation he needs. He kicks away the blankets that have tangled around his legs and crawls over to her, only stopping once they're face to face. El raises a hand to his cheek, trails her fingers along the line of his jaw. Her skin is cold enough to make him

jump.

“Where were you?” She asks, and Mike doesn’t understand. “Where were you?”

Mike pulls her hand away from his face, holds it in his own. “What do you mean? I’m right here, I’ve always been right here.”

El shakes her head. She’s growing paler and paler, nearly translucent. Her bottom lip has begun to quiver. “No,” she says, “ *no.* ” She pulls away from him and Mike panics.

“El, please, I’m sorry. Whatever I did, I’m sorry—”

“Mike?”

Mike starts at the sound. He turns and sees Will sitting up in bed, his expression wary. “Who’re you talking to?”

Mike gestures at El only to find that she’s gone. His eyes scan the room, each and every corner, but she’s nowhere to be found. They’re alone.

“I...” His voice fades. He can’t say it. He can’t admit that he’s fallen for what he promised himself he never would.

Will seems to know this, in his own way. “It’s all right,” he says, “just a dream.”

Mike nods and Will lies back down, slipping back to sleep almost instantly. Mike envies him.

He crawls back to his spot by the foot of the bed and spends the rest of the night trying to even out his breath. *It’s over* , he thinks, *this is it* .

He knows that nothing is ever going to get better. He’s been lying to himself this entire time.

Bob dies and Will loses his last wisp of control. They tie him to a chair and lock him in the shack that sits in his backyard. They crowd him with light and ignore his screams, his spasms. Jonathan plays music from his boombox and everyone shares stories as if the world isn't ending. It's all they can do.

Mike tells Will about the first time they met. There's a lump in his throat the entire time and he's unable to stop his tears but it doesn't matter.

He finds it fitting that they're here. That from the space of an end they've somehow circled back to the beginning.

It's over, he's almost sure that it's over.

He believes it right up until the very last minute. There's a dead demo-dog on the floor and even more howling outside. Everyone is waiting with baited breath and Mike, Mike is ready.

He watches the doorknob turn and tells himself that the time has finally come. His grip loosens on the candlestick he'd picked up, he doesn't need it, he knows he won't use it on whatever it is that tries to come through.

The door swings open and Mike swears all the air's been emptied from his lungs at once. It's El at the threshold. He only needs to see her for a second to know that it's her.

He doesn't move at first. He won't let himself. He wants to be sure, he can't fall for this again. He can't, he can't, he can't.

The hesitance doesn't last long.

Hopper's gun drops back down to his waist and Mike's legs move of their own accord. He feels as if he's being pulled, drawn by a fine light string that must be tied somewhere at the center of his chest.

He says her name and it's all she needs. They fall into each other's arms.

Her breath ghosts over the crook of his neck, warm and light. It sends a shudder through him, he's forgotten what this feels like. He didn't

think he'd ever be able to feel this at peace ever again.

They pull apart and he tries to take as much of her in as he can. She's a little older, a little different, but then again, so is he. He stares at her grown out hair and wants to touch it, run his fingers through it, but holds himself back for now.

They have time.

They have time .

He lets this truth settle inside him and feels the weight of the last year begin to slide off his shoulders like mounds of melting snow.